

LutheranWoman

May 2009

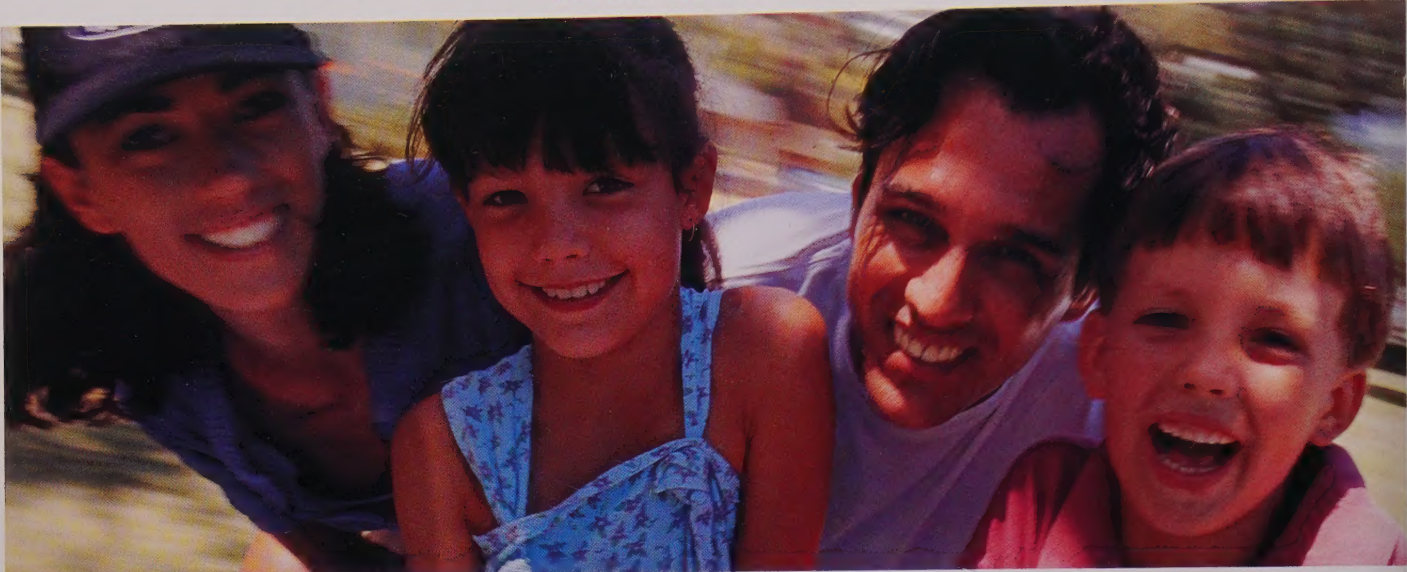
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UNEXPECTED
HEROES





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UNEXPECTED HEROES

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 4 MAY 2009

Some people in the Bible turn out to be unlikely heroes. That's good news for us—we may be unlikely heroes of faith too.

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VOICES

Unexpected Heroes

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

The heroes I know are not superheroes. Not one of them can leap a tall building. Not one has X-ray vision. No superpowers, no capes, no fancy spy gadgets.

No, the heroes I know are the ones who show up. They are the ones who help at the soup kitchen or lead the Bible study or make the quilts or visit the veterans' hospital—even though they themselves may be struggling with chronic illness or money worries or family problems. Some of them are barely getting by, but still manage to bring something to the potluck or make a donation to World Hunger. When they say they'll pray for you, you know they will. It's likely that you know some heroes like these. They see service and loving loyalty—*hesed*—as an expression of their faith.

This month's Bible study is the final session of "The Hidden Hand of God." The writers point out that Esther is an unexpected hero: "It is an orphaned young woman, rather than a prophet, priest, or warrior king like David, who delivers her people. Esther is an example of *hesed* toward the community even at great personal risk."

In this issue, you'll read about several unexpected heroes. In "A Wink and a Prayer," Peggy Tampion tells of her mother's powerful witness as she was dying: "Every doctor received a warm hand squeeze from the only hand that worked, a hearty thanks, and a wink (because words couldn't be counted on to come out right). Roommates told us how Mom's encouragement at night

kept them hopeful." It's a tribute that's especially appropriate as we celebrate Mother's Day.

In "Showing the Love of Christ," LaRayne Topp introduces us to St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Fremont, Nebraska, and to Mavis Heidemann. In 1971, mothers of mentally challenged adults asked Fremont's churches for Christian education for their grown children, and St. Timothy answered the call. "Mavis Heidemann was one of the first teachers. Mavis continues to fill that role today—at the age of 87." It would be easy to see Mavis as the unexpected hero here, but it's not that simple. The students are heroes too.

Also in this issue you'll find a profile of a Women of the ELCA leader in Eveleth, Minnesota—Marian Chase. Author Mary La Plante describes how the circles in Marian's congregation live out the Women of the ELCA purpose statement "by participating in Bible study, forming a close faith community and engaging in action."

Finally, in "What Kind of Christian?" Patricia Lull reflects on how she chooses to live as a woman of faith. She challenges readers to use her article "to start a conversation with the people you care about the most. What do you want your children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, neighbors, and co-workers to know about the shape of your life as a Christian?" This is a good reflection question as we prepare for Pentecost. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write to her at LWT@elca.org.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Daily Incarnations

Mary Mortimore Dossin

Editor's note:

Marj Leegard, who has been writing "Give Us This Day" for many years, has decided to retire. We are grateful for her wisdom and talent, and we wish her God's blessing. You may write to her in care of *Lutheran Woman Today*, 165 W. Higgins Road, Chicago 60631, and we will forward our letters to her.

From now, this space will feature the reflections of a variety of guest writers.

While the incarnation

of God in Jesus was unique, each of us is a kind of incarnation—we are the “word made flesh” for the people around us every day.

Often we can *be* the word without having to *say* a word. As my friend Tracy was, riding along silently with her pastor, who was facing a disciplinary hearing with the bishop. As I was, the day my sister's husband was killed in a traffic accident. When I arrived at Ann's crowded house after a hair-raising two-hour drive, she clung to me. As I began to rise from the couch to let someone else sit down, she put a firm hand on my knee and said, “Stay here.”

Recently, the husband of a friend of my sister's died. Ann spent a few days with her friend until family arrived. Later, when she called to tell me about it, she said, “You taught me what to do: Just be there.”

When we attend a wake or funeral, our words are rarely the real bearers of comfort. In fact, my sister said after Tom's death that she could have written a book about what *not* to say to new widows. I have learned over the years that the best thing to say to a grieving person is, “When you're having a bad day and need someone to sit with you, call me.”

Children are superb at being the word without saying anything extraordinary. My sister Ann and her teenage son came to live with us while she was divorcing her first husband. Our son Toby—whose name means “God is

good”—was part of her healing that year. A cute, sweet four-year-old, Toby adored his Aunt Ann and was home with her during the day, while the rest of us were off at school and work. One day, Ann said, “It's really hard to be depressed in a house with a Toby in it!”

Our congregation participates in a ministry for homeless families. Our children get down on the floor and play with the babies or sit on the couch with other young ones to watch a “Davey and Goliath” video. Occasionally, at school they encounter the children they met when we were hosting their families at church. Even six-year-olds know not to identify the children as homeless. They simply treat them like friends and help them find their way around.

Each of us has our own memory of times when our presence has been God's word for another. We can be unexpected heroes—sitting with friends as they receive chemotherapy, offering a “mother fix” for a homesick college student, holding the hands of the sick or dying, giving hugs and handshakes when sharing the peace at church.

I once believed that I'd need to memorize Bible verses in order to spread God's word and love. After 60-plus years, I've learned that God had a better plan: sending us not a sermon but Jesus.

Sometimes all we can do for a person is stand by their cross, as did the women who once stood by the cross of Jesus. That is enough. 🌿

Mary Mortimore Dossin lives with her husband, Ernie, on the shore of Lake Champlain in New York.

by LaRayne Topp

SHOWING THE LOVE OF CHRIST



Mother and daughter Mavis and Linda Heidemann teach the song...

n Norenberg greets people at the entrance to St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Fremont, Nebraska, passing out bulletins and friendly smiles. Cheryl Kubin follows Ken's welcome with hugs that can warm even the chilliest churchgoer. During the service, Tom Metzger leads the Lord's Prayer, his powerful voice filled with strength of conviction and faith-filled enthusiasm.

Ken, Cheryl, and Tom are students of St. Timothy's classes for developmentally challenged adults. Serving as acolytes, greeters, and ushers during regular congregational worship, the students range in age from 20 to 63. Each Sunday morning, about 35 students fill three classrooms at St. Timothy, having grown in numbers from the 10 or so students who began the program 38 years ago.

In 1971, mothers of mental-challenged adults approached Fremont's ministerial association,

requesting Christian education for their grown children. Although some congregations in the area offered a Wednesday evening class, that wasn't enough for Pastor Loren Wolf of St. Timothy. He put the parents' feelings into words when he said, "These people deserve a place on Sunday mornings."

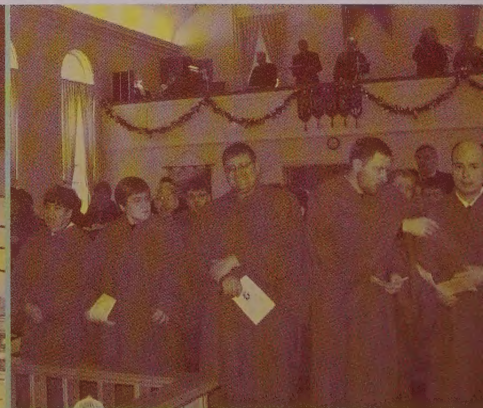
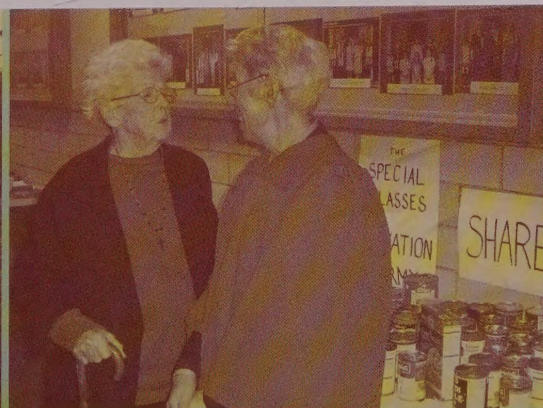
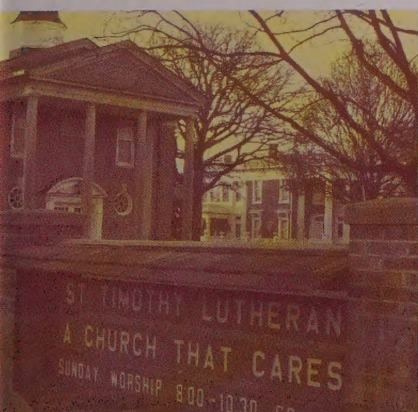
As a result, the education committee and council, on behalf of St. Timothy, decided to take on classes for developmentally challenged adults as their mission.

Invitations were sent to churches of all denominations in the area, and on a Sunday morning in January 1972, classes began. Mavis Heidemann, a member of St. Timothy's education committee, was one of the first teachers. Mavis continues to fill that role today—at the age of 87. "The students give me a purpose for living and serving," Mavis said. "It's really a great thing that Pastor Wolf started."

The students meet in classrooms that once were filled with seminarians; the church and surrounding buildings had served as chapel, classrooms, and dormitory for Central Lutheran Theological Seminary for many years. Before it was absorbed into Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary in 1967, 419 graduates had earned their Master of Divinity degrees at Fremont's seminary. St. Timothy acquired the buildings in 1969.

LOVE AND MUSIC

No matter where the special students of St. Timothy meet, whether it's in Sunday morning classes, at their jobs at the ENCOR (Eastern Nebraska Community Office of Retardation) workshop, or in their family or group homes, the students are filled with what can best be described by the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is in the everyday-ness of their lives that St. Timothy's special



They bring the gift of the real thing. They're about worship. They're about Jesus."

students shine with God's love, and they pass on that love to people they meet. "They're enthusiastic; they give hugs; they love everyone. And they're here every Sunday because they want to be," Mavis said.

The Sunday morning classes see students studying Bible stories, much like students in other Sunday schools, and ending their hour together with prayer and singing.

Each year the classes enjoy a potluck dinner served by the two very active circles of Women of the ELCA at St. Timothy, of which Mavis is a past president. The women also host refreshments after the students' annual Christmas program. That's when students don bright red choir robes and fill the chapel with a joyful noise unto the Lord.

"They sing from the heart," Mavis said. "Some are non-verbal, but you can see they enjoy it." As the students sing, listeners are moved to tears. The students who can give readings do so. Whether they read the text or memorize it, they are eager to do well.

Several of the students sing solo verses of favorite songs, such as "Amazing Grace" and "In the Garden," backed by the choir. Others are not timid about praying aloud and leading the congregation in familiar prayers. The choir has also

provided music at three or four funerals at St. Timothy.

THE BEST AMEN

Because the students come from a number of different Christian traditions—Lutheran, Methodist, and Roman Catholic, for example—the materials used in the classrooms are non-denominational. The teachers at St. Timothy use the Friendship Series produced by Faith Alive Christian Resources.

All students use the same edition of the Bible, given in memory of one student's sister. Several memorials each year are dedicated to the special needs classes; funding for classroom needs comes from regular Sunday school offerings as well as donations from parents and others.

Students seeking confirmation attend separate classes. Over the years, five have been confirmed and joined St. Timothy. One student has been baptized. He is only too eager to talk about his baptism, Mavis says.

St. Timothy's current pastor, the Rev. John Plowman, who was called to the congregation in June 2001, said that this ministry is one of the best-kept secrets in the Nebraska Synod, but he has been given the key: "The congregation exists to do this. We minister to those who society says are the least."

As the congregation ministers to the mentally challenged, the students, in turn, keep the congregation focused. "Their joy is Christ in action," Mavis explained. "They show the love of Christ. They don't judge or belittle or demean others. You can't help but love them." Mavis's daughter Linda Heide mann assists her mother in teaching the students. "I'd rather teach them than any other class," Linda said, "because they're so sincere. We get lost in the things of life, and they keep it simple. They accept life for what it is."

The church's ministry has attracted many who appreciate the congregation's commitment to living God's love.

As for the students, "They bring the presence of Christ in ways beyond measure," Plowman said. "They bring the gift of the real thing. They're about worship. They're about Jesus." When Plowman gives communion to St. Timothy's special students, they may respond not with a spoken "amen" but with fingers formed into an "okay" sign. "That's the best amen in our lives," Plowman said. 🌿

LaRayne Topp is a participant of Women of the ELCA at Christ Lutheran Church Wisner, Nebraska, where her husband, Dale, serves as vicar.

"The congregation exists to do this. We minister to those who society says are the least."

Mother's Day is May 10



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BOLD WOMEN FOR PEACE

by Deborah Bogaert



The country of Liberia was founded in 1822, when a small group of African Americans—supported by the American Colonization Society, which encouraged free persons of color in the United States to settle in Africa—colonized a piece of land along the Atlantic coast of Africa. Twenty-five years later, the colony declared its independence.

In the 1920s, the Firestone Company discovered that Liberia was an ideal place to grow rubber. After World War II, mining and agricultural companies flourished in Liberia. A few elite, most descended from the colonists, lived very well in this economy, but the majority of the people saw little benefit.

Economic woes and discord between the rich and the poor began to fester in the 1970s. A military coup in 1980 ushered in a brutal and repressive government, and all-out civil war erupted in 1989. Warlord Charles Taylor was elected president in 1997, but civil war continued until 2003, when the Liberian women demanded—and eventually won—peace.

The work of peacebuilding

Leymah Gbowee, president of the women's organization at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in the capital city, Monrovia, and Comfort Freeman, president of the National Lutheran Church Women Fellowship, had begun organizing the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) among Christian women in 2002. They broadened their network by reaching out to Muslim women with the message, "Can a bullet pick and choose? Does it know Christian from Muslim?" In spring 2003, the Christian and Muslim women agreed to work together, and that April, some 3,000 women gathered for the launch of WIPNET.

For more than a month, every day, whether under blazing hot sun or pouring rain, the women held public sit-ins for peace along a road that President Taylor had to travel on his way to work.

Initially, Taylor refused to meet with the women, but eventually it became clear that he had to deal with this growing movement. The women were granted a meeting and

presented their call for a cease-fire and good-faith negotiations. A plan for peace and a new government in Liberia was finally established at peace talks that began in 2003. Taylor was exiled later that year, and the United Nations stabilized the country. Liberia is now headed by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, elected in 2005.

The work of peacekeeping

The war may be over, but Liberia still faces enormous challenges. Running water has been re-established in only about half of Monrovia, home to more than one million people. The city's power grid was destroyed in 1992, so electricity is supplied by private generators, often for only a few hours a day. Former refugees and displaced persons are flocking back to the nation now that the war is over, putting further strain on the housing stock and what's left of the infrastructure. Unemployment is higher than 70 percent.

I traveled to Liberia to visit projects supported by Women of the ELCA grants and endowments,

LIBERIA is a West African country that was ravaged by civil war for 14 years, from 1989 until 2003, when peace came, thanks largely to the efforts of the women of the Lutheran Church in Liberia. Last November, I traveled there with Women of the ELCA executive director Linda Post Bushkofsky. We met many bold and faithful women who have mobilized to rebuild their lives and their country.

Participants in the Women's Empowerment Program at St. Luke's parish in Phebe, Liberia. The program received a grant from Women of the ELCA in 2007.



and to learn more about the Lutheran women of Liberia. Their organization sounds remarkably like our own: They meet in national and local conventions for elections and to enjoy speakers, workshops, and fellowship; they develop programs for spiritual and personal development; and they engage in service.

While staying at the Lutheran Church in Liberia (LCL) compound in Monrovia, I was happy to discover that the spirit of WIPNET continues among the women of Liberia. Every Tuesday, a group of at least 30 women gathers in the LCL chapel for an all-day prayer meeting. As they did during the WIPNET protests, the women come wearing all-white garments to symbolize peace. All day, they pray, sing, and dance for continued peace and reconciliation in Liberia.

Jassa Gbaroyon, the coordinator of this faithful prayer group, explained, "We are here so that the work of Christ can go on in this world. We are here to continue the work of Christ, the work of peace. We are all branches of the same tree, so we are here together. We come because reconciliation and healing are not finished."

The work of rebuilding

Later in the week, Linda and I left Monrovia to visit other parts of the country. The first stop was Phebe in central Liberia. In 2007, the Women of

the ELCA grants program awarded money to the women of St. Luke Lutheran Parish, Phebe, for their Vital Initiative for the Empowerment of Women (VIEW) program. The program supports women and teenage girls living with HIV and AIDS through counseling and self-improvement initiatives, and it also teaches women income-producing skills.

With the grant, the women chose to learn soap making because the ingredients are easy to obtain and there is a good market for locally made soap.

Every woman we met that Saturday morning had a story of how the civil war had affected her family. One woman's husband had died early in the war. Then her only son was killed. Her soap-making business will support her and the nine children and grandchildren who depend on her.

We talked with another woman whose husband and uncle had died in the war. She is caring for her own and her uncle's children, but cannot afford to send them to school—the fees are too much. She is hoping to sell enough soap to send her children back to school next term.

Another young woman's family was intact, but her husband has been unable to find work. They have started a small farm, and she is happy to be able to contribute to her family's support by making and selling soap.

Thirty-five women participated in the soap-making project. Since we were visiting near the end of the training, we got to see the results of their hard work: large batches of various soaps, which they are now bringing to market in small cooperatives. We purchased a two-and-a-half-foot bar of soap—their first sale!—and brought it back to the churchwide office as a tangible reminder of the reach of our grants program and the hope these grants provide.

The coordinator of the project told us how helpful the grant has been. "After the war, I used to see the women going around to beg people for food and for clothes."

Knowing the women could help themselves if they knew how and if they had the means, she said she learned about the Women of the ELCA grant program.

After receiving the grant, she said, "I see the women are improving. I see life in their faces." Before learning how to help themselves they would "appear so depressed." But most of them are happy now she said. "They are very happy that they learned something to help themselves and their families. Tell the women in the United States that we are thankful and we appreciate what you have done for us."

The work of healing

Our grants program is well known. But ministries supported by our

ng-established endowment funds
e not. Two of those endowments
upport Curran Lutheran Hospital
northern Liberia.

The hospital, opened in 1924, is
operated by the Lutheran Church
Liberia. It is the only health care
facility in a large area. It also super-
sides 23 health centers and clinics in
three surrounding districts as well
s across the border in Guinea.

The Curran staff visit villages
that have no clinic in a mobile unit
that is on the road for days at a
time. The top five illnesses they
treat are malaria, diarrhea, pneu-
monia, acute respiratory infections,
and sexually transmitted diseases.
Diabetes and hypertension are also
prevalent in adults.

The hospital has a certified mid-
wifery program that reopened in
September 2008. Liberia's maternal
death rate is high; trained midwives
will help more women survive
childbirth. When we visited, there
were 39 women in the 18-month
midwifery program. After passing
the government licensing exam, the
graduates will be assigned to rural
clinics; Liberia's national health
plan calls for a midwife in every
clinic in the country.

Future projects at the hospital
include a training program for first-
aid instructors and a school health
program, which will include nutrition
education and vision testing. They
hope to start with five schools.

Curran Hospital was almost
destroyed during the war. Volun-
teers from the Upper Susquehanna
Synod and Women of the ELCA in
that synod have been key partners
in rebuilding and providing funds.
Curran's medical equipment has
been provided by Global Health
Ministries, and its beds have come
from churches in Germany.

Women's groups in Liberia sup-
port students, and sometimes patients,
with the produce of their gardens.
The proceeds raise money for trans-
portation to and from the hospital.

The work of teaching

American Lutheran women have
been supporting education in Libe-
ria for generations; Women of the
ELCA holds an endowment created
in 1916 that now serves the Libe-
rian Training Institute in northern
Liberia. Over the last five years, the
endowment has provided the school
about \$13,000.

The Lutheran Training Institute
(LTI), built in 1958, was a board-
ing high school with more than 300
students. It was the largest Lutheran
school in the country. But during
the war, most of its buildings were
nearly destroyed.

LTI reopened after the war,
offering courses in agriculture. Car-
pentry and masonry were added in
2006, and in 2007, plumbing, tailor-
ing, and auto mechanics were intro-
duced. LTI is committed to techni-

cal and vocational education that
prepares young people to contribute
to post-war society and hopes even-
tually to reintroduce an academic
high school program.

The work of women

When the opportunity to go to
Liberia came up, I couldn't say no.
I especially wanted to meet women
who had brought down a dictator—
talk about women mobilized to act
boldly!—and kept on with the work
of rebuilding their lives, communi-
ties, and country.

Liberia is not an easy place to
live. It's not an easy place to visit.
The roads are terrible. The econ-
omy is a mess. Sometimes we had
running water, but most of the time,
we didn't. We slept under mosquito
nets to prevent malaria. We had elec-
tricity for only few hours a day, and
no one could predict *which* hours.
We struggled daily in the 95-degree
heat and oppressive humidity.

But the effort was absolutely
worth it. I was able to see and
come back to tell you about the
good things Women of the ELCA
is accomplishing all over the world.
Your ongoing support of Women of
the ELCA and its grants program—
and the legacy of our foremothers—
makes stories like these possible.
In the words of Apostle Paul, "We
thank God for you." 🌸

Deborah Bogaert is director for communi-
cation, Women of the ELCA.



CALENDAR NOTES

May

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), *Sundays and Seasons*, and *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW), published by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (www.augsburgfortress.org)

The merry month of May falls entirely within the season of Easter this year, ending with Pentecost, when we rejoice in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Alleluia!

1 Philip and James, Apostles

All we know of this James is his name; he is called James the Less to distinguish him from the other James. Jesus called Philip very early (see John 1:43–46). It took Philip some time to realize who Jesus really was, as we can see in today's Gospel reading. But even without fully understanding, he still kept inviting people to meet Jesus: "Come and see." What does this tell us? Today's readings are Isaiah 30:18–21; Psalm 44:1–3, 20–26; 2 Corinthians 4:1–6; John 14:8–14.

3 Fourth Sunday of Easter

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." We often imagine gentle Jesus carrying a sweet little lamb who somehow hasn't left a hoof print on his spotless white garment. Real shepherds (and sheep) aren't quite that elegant! That's a comfort for us muddy sheep who keep wandering off and getting in trouble—our good shepherd is willing to climb into the thorn bushes for us, thank God. The texts appointed for today are Acts 4:5–12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16–24; John 10:11–18.

4 Monica, mother of Augustine

Monica's deep faith and deep determination brought her brilliant son Augustine to baptism after a wild youth. Read more about her (and Helena, May 21) in

"Saintly Mothers," published in the May 2008 *LWT* and available on our Web site, www.lutheranwomantoday.org. Click "featured articles" then "back issues."

8 Julian of Norwich, renewer of the church
Evangelical Lutheran Worship includes a prayer of Julian (see page 87 in the hymnal), which ends: "Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

10 Fifth Sunday of Easter

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the true vine." Why would our Savior call himself a plant? All through the Old Testament, Israel is portrayed as a vine or vineyard, a field of grapevines for producing wine (a symbol of joy and life). The image of a vine would have meant God's chosen people of Israel to the disciples, just as the image of a shamrock today calls to mind the Irish people. He's telling us that our joy and abundant life depend on being attached to him, not to a nation, culture, or way of life. Today's texts are Acts 8:26–40; Psalm 22:25–31, 1 John 4:7–21; John 15:1–8.

10 Mother's Day

Thanks be to God for mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, godmothers, aunts, great-aunts, spiritual mothers, and big sisters, too!

14 Matthias, Apostle

The calendar used to commemorate Matthias in February, but more recently

the apostle's day was moved to May so that it would come after Easter, since Matthias was chosen after the first Easter. See today's second reading for the story. The passages appointed for Matthias' day are Isaiah 66:1-2; Psalm 56; Acts 1:15-26; Luke 6:12-16.

7 Sixth Sunday of Easter

When Jesus walked among us in the eastern Roman Empire in the first century, a friend wasn't just an acquaintance, neighbor, or work buddy; friendship was a sincere, honest, mutually uplifting relationship between equals. And Jesus calls us his friends! Today's texts are Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17.

21 Ascension of Our Lord

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus told the disciples to wait for the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit. And once the Holy Spirit has come, they (we!) will be Jesus' wit-

nesses to the ends of the earth. Alleluia! The texts appointed for today are Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47 or 93; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53.

21 Helena, mother of Constantine

This bold woman came out a luxurious retirement to search out the holy places in and around Jerusalem, which had been destroyed more than two centuries before. Can you imagine leading archaeological digs in your late 70s? Read more about her (and Monica, May 4) in "Saintly Mothers," published in the May 2008 issue of *LWT* and available on our Web site, www.lutheranwomantoday.org.

24 Seventh Sunday of Easter

The Gospel for this last Sunday of the Easter season always includes Jesus' heartfelt prayer for the unity of his followers—that we may be one, as he and his Father are one, in love and joy. That unity is the work of the Holy Spirit, who came

in power at Pentecost and whom we all receive in baptism. Today's texts are Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19.

30 Vigil of Pentecost

The Prayer of the Day for the Vigil of Pentecost reminds us that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of God's Easter promise. The passages appointed for the Vigil are Exodus 19:1-9 or Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 33:12-22 or Psalm 130; Romans 8:14-17, 22-27; John 7:37-39.

31 Day of Pentecost

The Holy Spirit enlivens not just individuals, but whole communities and peoples. God's gracious plan is the renewal of all creation—and that is the fullness of the gift of baptism! Alleluia, alleluia! Rejoice today with Acts 2:1-21 or Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Romans 8:22-27 or Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15.



A WINK AND A PRAYER

by Peggy Tampion



My mother died. She was 84 going on 50. We lived with her dying for five weeks. In her dying, she lived heroically for Christ.

Something had happened to her along the way, something that many of us strive to achieve by doing yoga, reading a book, or listening to music. That thing is inner peace and contentment no matter what happens. Her peace came from the knowledge that she was a child of God, saved by grace.

Mom had put a stone over Dad's grave that read: *I have called you by name, you are mine* (Isaiah 43:1). That verse was life to her. The Isaiah text goes on to talk about God's presence when we go through the waters and struggles of life. That's exactly what her name meant—Elsa Martha—consecrated by God, but sometimes sorrowfully struggling.

At 83, Mom had a knee replacement. She was a stellar patient, and much to our chagrin (really, our delight), she was soon driving to nursing homes to minister to the "old people" and heading a prayer ministry for her congregation. You couldn't have a chat with her without another phone call coming in with a prayer request.

Then the stroke happened. She lost her balance and her gait was uneven. In the hospital, her right arm grew weaker and eventually went limp. "We've got to add stroke

people to the prayer list," she said. "Some of them can't function at all."

Although rehab was supposed to be helpful, her smile dimmed. She knew that her speech and movement were deteriorating. Mom started having seizures, and tests revealed a brain tumor. Drugs stopped the seizures, and her smile returned. Every doctor received a warm hand squeeze from the only hand that worked, a hearty thanks, and a wink (because words couldn't be counted on to come out right). Roommates told us how Mom's encouragement at night kept them hopeful. She introduced them all to her best friend, Jesus.

SO MUCH^{*} TO SAY

The pastoral[†] minister from her church stopped by to tell her, "We're all praying for you, Elsa." Her response was, "What the heck for?" Then came the hand squeeze and wink.

During those days she pronounced the sentence that we will always remember: "I am so sad that I do not have the wherewithal to talk, because I have so much to say." Her eyes twinkled because it came out just as she wanted it to be said. Through halting speech, she told us that she wanted to talk to each son-in-law to be sure that he understood God's promise of eternal life through Jesus. We daughters weren't exempt. We'd heard the

beautiful speech, seen the transformation, and knew the hope that comes from knowing that you are a child of God, called by name.

Mom agreed to a biopsy—for us. We played Hangman on the hospital room whiteboard as we waited for surgery. Mom was still trying to teach us about God. Her word was going to be *psalms*, but her illness made her spell it a bit different "No, that isn't right," she laughed, "I spelled it wrong." She was trying to tell us that when everything seems wrong and hard, read the Psalms.

The time came. The surgeons came in to explain the tumor and the procedure to Mom. "Thank you," she said, "I understand, but we'll still hope it's just an infection." And she winked.

It wasn't long until the doctors had news for us—bad news.

Death introduces itself in a quiet way. The response can be a peaceful submission, a drive to leave a legacy, a fight to the end, or a desire not to know. But Mom's response was to seize each moment as an invitation to undo death's fearsome hold on people by telling them about life in Christ.

GOING HOME

We went to the recovery room and waited for her to wake up. That was hard, but harder still was the news we had to tell her. During the procedure, her pacemaker had

failed. Replacing it meant another operation. But Mom's dialogue with God had already charted the course. Hardly able to speak, she clearly said, "No, it's simple, I'm going *home*. No more." Home clearly meant heaven. No wink this time, just the determination of a tired child of God.

From then on she thanked every doctor with her outstretched hand, a squeeze, a wink, and her witness, "I'm going *home*." They knew what she meant. A blood clot formed and the doctors came quickly to dissolve it. "No, thank you, I'm going *home*." They said, "You could die." She answered, "That's fine," and winked.

We took her back to her condo for what we hoped would be sev-

eral weeks. We all camped out there, even the grandchildren. It was busy and she tolerated it all. She didn't even mind the cupboard doors slamming because she was on a mission to go home. God's promise was in her heart.

But our three-month hope was futile. We had one week. People streamed in to see the woman who had touched them and prayed for them. Her brother came for three days to sit with her and sing hymns in German. Yes, our God is a mighty fortress! On the last day she took out her dentures—the thing she had dreaded most. She had to tell the good news of Jesus with her outstretched hand and little wink. She could no longer speak.

We kept vigil. A little after sunrise we were awakened—was it an angel calling us to be with her at her homecoming? One last gasp and then she entered into the peace she had believed in for a lifetime.

FULL OF JOY

Now our task was to prepare for her homecoming celebration. We remembered that one day she had struggled to tell us that something important was in the kitchen, or in her wallet, or in her notebook. In the kitchen drawer we found check registers. Each one had a note: My Funeral. That isn't all we found. We found the testimony she had written about her faith journey. Mom would want you to read this part of it:

"One advantage of being 83 years old is that I can look back and see exactly how the Lord has worked in my life. I don't believe God gives talents and gifts merely to gain happiness and success. God has a purpose for all of our lives and that is to glorify him in all that we do using the gifts we have been given. And now I can say that God created a love and concern for people and their salvation in my heart.

"Please don't dismiss this as the writing of a religious nut or something. I must say this because when I get to heaven God will ask me, 'Why didn't you tell them what happened to you? I thought you cared for them.'

"There were times when I felt uncomfortable talking about my faith, but God took care of that feeling. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable with something so vitally important, probably the most important thing in your life.

"I have kept on praying and asking God to help you understand what he wants you to do, and asking that the way you live will always please and honor the Lord, so that you will always be doing good, kind things for others while all the time you are learning to know God better and better. I am praying that you will be filled with God's mighty, glorious strength so that you can keep going no matter what happens—always full of the joy of the Lord." 🌸

Peggy Tampuson served as journal keeper as she and her sisters, Susie Novak, Holly Stiles, and Tammy Toburen, witnessed this faithful adventure. Peggy lives in Medina, Ohio, with her husband and their newly adopted 14-year-old twins.



LET US PRAY

What Makes a Hero

by Debra K. Farrington

She's there for a couple

hours every weekday morning and then again in the afternoon. Rain, shine, or snow, when school is opening or closing, she's on the corner, making sure traffic stops at the intersection so children get to school safely. Those of us who pass by her probably don't think of her as a hero; the word *hero* summons up deeds of epic proportions. But she's making life and death decisions for our kids, and that makes her a hero in my book.

Some of our heroes are those who've demonstrated astonishing bravery in the face of adversity, people who've exceeded all expectations. Esther is among them. But the world is full of unlikely heroes—people like you and me—who step in to help in situations that might otherwise overwhelm someone.

A friend of mine who had never lived with a dog before recently adopted an eight-week-old puppy. She'd lost sleep for several nights (puppies being much like babies) and was exhausted. I was able to provide tips on how to help the puppy sleep through the night and take care of potty needs, resulting in restful nights for all. It was a small thing for me to do—I work with animals all the time—but after a couple nights of uninterrupted sleep my friend sure thought I was a hero. In the sense that I helped solve a problem that was overwhelming her, I was.

I'll bet you're surrounded by heroes in your own community. The young woman I saw in the grocery store helping her elderly neighbor with the shop-

ping. The friends who bring dinner for the family with a newborn. These folks and so many more are the heroes who help by lifting the burden off another's shoulders. I suspect that you not only know some of these heroes, but that you're one of them too.

Take some time this month to notice the heroic deeds of those around you, and while you're at it, notice your own. Remember that each time we're able to lift the burden from another's shoulders we're doing the work that God asks of us. As the mystic Teresa of Avila reminds us in her prayer:

God of love, help us to remember
that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone.
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good.

While you're noticing all the heroic deeds that occur every day, take time to be grateful for them and for the heroes who do them. Thank God for the opportunities given to you to ease the burden of others.

Also thank those who are helping others. It's so easy to take these simple but important deeds for granted. Perhaps today would be a good day for me to go to the corner and thank that faithful school crossing guard. 🌸

Debra K. Farrington is a retreat leader and has written eight books of Christian spirituality. Her Web site is www.debrafarrington.com.



HEALTH WISE

Your Guide to Stroke Safety

by Molly M. Ginty

Diana Fite knew she was at risk.

Even so, this 56-year-old Houston resident neglected to take the medication she needed for high blood pressure, the leading cause of stroke.

Though she was a medical doctor, Fite ignored the possibility that she could have a stroke (a blood vessel blockage or rupture that injures or kills brain cells)—until the day three years ago when she was driving and suddenly lost control of her right side.

“My car was swerving back and forth, but I somehow managed to steer off the road, use my left foot to kick my right foot off the gas pedal, and use my cell phone to call 911,” says Fite. “In a garbled voice, with half my face paralyzed, I told the operator that I’d had a stroke, and was rushed to the nearest stroke specialty center.”

Every year, 700,000 Americans suffer strokes. But unlike Fite, who got successful treatment quickly, half of these patients experience permanent paralysis or other health complications. Stroke claims 150,000 lives annually and is the third leading cause of death in the United States, reports the American Stroke Association. Especially endangered are women, who suffer 60 percent of strokes and who take birth control pills and hormone therapy that can boost their risk.

In May, American Stroke Month, what can you do to protect yourself from this leading cause of disability?

The best way to guard against a stroke, say experts, is to prevent one in

the first place. Smoking, diabetes, obesity, and high cholesterol all boost your risk. So does atrial fibrillation, an irregular heartbeat that can cause blood to pool in the heart and form clots. The worst culprit? High blood pressure, which can cause tiny blood vessels in the brain to become rigid and blocked. Researchers say half of strokes could be prevented if people with high blood pressure kept their condition under control.

In addition to addressing these health issues, adults over age 20 should have a blood pressure screening every five years. People with atrial fibrillation can take anti-clotting drugs such as warfarin. Those at high risk can take an aspirin daily to prevent blood platelets from forming clots—or have preventive surgery to prop open an artery, remove a blockage, or seal off an aneurysm (a weak spot in the blood vessel wall).

These steps can help you ward off an ordeal that is nothing short of terrifying. During a stroke, the brain is deprived of oxygen and nutrients, and 1.9 million nerve and brain cells die per minute. As a result, sufferers can suddenly lose muscle control (usually on one side); be unable to speak or understand speech (aphasia); and experience searing headaches, double vision, and altered consciousness.

After a massive stroke, survivors may never be able to speak coherently—or breathe without a ventilator—again. The damage can be equally devastating from an ischemic stroke (the most common form, in which a blood clot blocks

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

an artery to the brain) or a hemorrhagic one (in which a blood vessel in the brain bursts or ruptures).

The most common strokes are transient ischemic “mini-strokes,” with temporary symptoms such as the loss of vision for half an hour. For every full-scale stroke that receives medical attention, five to 10 of these smaller or silent ones go unattended, setting the stage for larger strokes—and big health trouble—in the future.

Twenty percent of patients who have mini-strokes suffer full-blown ones within three months—the reason you must see a doctor immediately if you have temporary numbness, weakness, dizziness, or severe headache. According to a 2007 British study, patients who receive stroke treatment within 24 hours reduce their risk of a second incident by 80 percent compared with those who wait three days or more.

If you do experience the symptoms of stroke, call for medical help right away. It takes the average American 12 to 24 hours to get to the hospital after stroke symptoms,” says Jim Baranski, director of the National Stroke Association. “But faster action is crucial for saving lives.”

Make sure that your doctor gives you an accurate diagnosis, done with X-rays, sound waves, or a diffusion MRI scan that shows fluid moving in the brain—and slowing dramatically as dying brain cells swell).

To treat stroke, doctors may remove obstructions with surgery such as carotid endarterectomy (done on the major

artery in the neck) or angioplasty (which widens arteries leading to the brain). They may administer blood-thinning drugs, or, in the case of ischemic stroke, dispense clot-busting tPA (tissue plasminogen activator, given within three hours of a stroke to reduce the chances of injury by 30 to 65 percent).

To treat her stroke three years ago, Dr. Fite took tPA, which helped her



immobilized right side come back to life—and spared her from long-term damage. Today, Fite takes the daily medication she neglected in the past: three blood pressure pills and a cholesterol-lowering drug. “I’m also taking a drug to prevent blood clots,” she says. “That last drug never would have been necessary if I had snapped out of denial and paid attention to my health.” 🌿

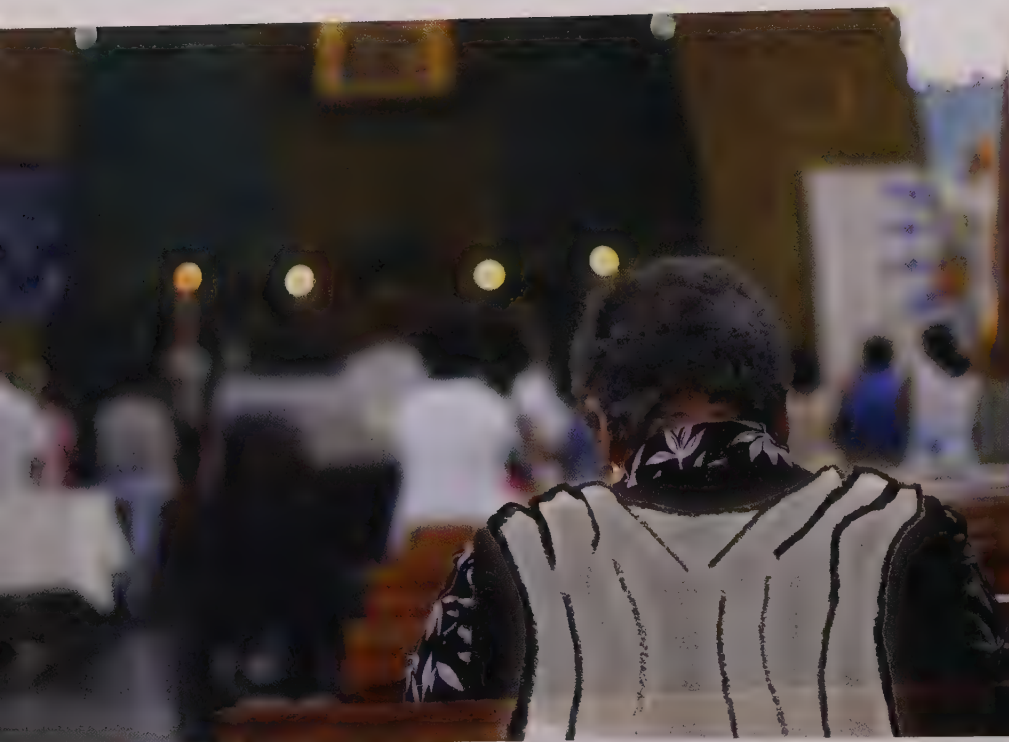
Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women’s eNews*.

For more information:

American Stroke Association
www.strokeassociation.org

National Stroke Association
www.stroke.org

The Stroke Collaborative
www.giveme5forstroke.org



What Kind of Christian

by Patricia Lull

WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF VERIFICATION. Almost daily, I am asked for a password or a PIN number. Recently, to pump gas into my car I had to punch in my zip code. Similar things happen when I call to schedule appointments or order merchandise. You likely can share your own list of both comical and serious inquiries that are meant to verify your identity. We have to prove that we really are who we say we are.

It is much rarer to be asked *why* we are who we say we are. Why am I the kind of Christian who prays and reads the Bible daily, worships weekly, tithes my money and talent, and sets aside time throughout the year to step back and reflect on my relationship with God? What motivates me to practice my faith in these ways? Those answers are far more complex



than the simple four-digit code I use to get cash from an ATM.

Some might think that my habits make me a real Christian, as opposed to a nominal Christian. I find it hard to draw that line and am willing to trust God to know the motives, the experiences, and the challenges that influence the lives of Christians, including some who are here much less often than I am at Sunday worship. How we live out our faith matters, but determining who is a real Christian and who is not seems to be more God's business than mine.

God matters

As I write, I think of my seven nieces and nephews, their spouses and partners, their friends, and the many younger adults I know whose lives intrigue me—even if they are not devoted to God in quite the same way I am. You probably know some people like that, too.

I invite you to use this article to start a conversation with the people you care about the most. What do you want your children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, neighbors, and co-workers to know about the shape of your life as a Christian?

Let me tell you why my Christian life has this particular shape. I am ordained. I work at a seminary. Though some might call me “hard core” in my convictions, no one pays me to be a Christian. That’s my baptismal identity, not my occupation. I groan like everyone else when the alarm clock rings early on a Sunday morning. I can think of lots of other ways to spend the time and the money I invest in my congregation. I don’t always find it easy to pray or to take time to read the Bible. But here are the reasons I live my life as I do.

At the deepest level of my being, I believe that God matters. From childhood I have had a deep certainty that there is a God. I was carried to my baptism by parents who wanted my life to be wrapped in the same promise of grace that sustained them. I was surrounded that day and have been surrounded every Sunday since by real people

with real faith. I am certain that the weekly practice of gathering with the baptized has changed me more than I know.

It may be that I am gifted with a religious disposition, because I have always been interested in questions about God. I am drawn to discussions of the many ways in which human beings respond to their experience of the holy. I know that not everyone shares that native interest or curiosity. For some, the discovery that God matters can come out of the blue. Those are the dramatic stories of conversion. Being a lifelong Christian may seem a lot less glamorous, but that is where my story begins.

Sunday after Sunday

A few weeks ago a woman in our congregation learned that she was seriously ill. I was as stunned by the news as her family and friends were. She has been in my prayers each morning since I learned of her illness. I do not know her all that well, but I know that the weight of sickness and worry is on her young shoulders. Because we are members of the same community of faith, her struggles concern me, too.

This past Sunday I looked across the aisle where she sat with her family. As she sang the liturgy, her voice joined our common cry for mercy, peace, and healing in the world. If you did not know her, you

would not guess how critically ill she is. If you did know her, you would have to wonder what it means for her to hold others in prayer. It was one of those amazing revelations that come from worshiping with the same people Sunday after Sunday. Bearing each other's burdens isn't just a concept; it is something I have learned to incorporate into my life.

When I am sad or weary, when my own life is full of grief or discouragement, the community of faith cares for me. I have been carried by the prayers and generosity of others at several critical times in my life. When I am strong and self-assured, the same community invites me to care about more than my own well-being. Churches are made up of real people with challenges, flaws, and failings, but I go to worship each week because I don't know how to be me without being part of the we that is the church.

Some might say that my worship attendance is a habit, and it is. It is a good, life-giving habit that immerses my life in a community of faith that understands the connection between Sunday worship and the rest of the week. If I drive to church with thoughts of work and family swimming in my head, I drive home from church knowing that many of those thoughts have been reframed by the sermon I just heard, or the Lord's Supper, or the hymns, or the conversation dur-

ing coffee hour. What happens on Sunday changes how I live the other days of the week.

Witness and wisdom

Over the five decades of my life, the church has helped me think about a variety of issues: war, civil rights, nuclear arms, Jewish-Christian relations, poverty, homelessness, sexuality and gender, global economics, immigration, and environmental concerns. On each of those topics my perspective was shaped—and often reshaped—by listening to the views of others within a community of faith. Lively parish discussions have not replaced my reading and study on such topics, but knowing real Christians with different views has cooled my claim to have the only right answer. It has made me much better at listening to the perspectives of others.

I can say the same about a disciplined reading of the Bible. Often my own thinking has been turned around by a story from Scripture that caused me to look at a situation from another perspective. My heart has been lifted by a verse or a psalm that reassures me of God's steadfast love for me and this creation. Most importantly, my understanding of the world and what it means to be a human being has been profoundly shaped by the biblical narrative. Why would I expect it to be otherwise? After all, this is

God's word, and coming into daily contact with God's witness and wisdom is bound to have a discernable effect on my life.

The Christian teaching that most challenges me is Christ's mandate that we forgive others as we have been forgiven. Forgiveness is hard work. It would not be on my mind so much were I not reminded Sunday by Sunday of God's grace and mercy toward me. Over the years, I have listened to many stories of disappointment with the behavior of Christians—behavior that falls far short of this commandment.

I don't deny that the experience of many people has been clouded by church communities driven by a narrow, judgmental spirit. I am simply saying that my experience has been overwhelmingly on the side of receiving grace and forgiveness.

The embrace of faith

Why do I pattern my life on a weekly rhythm of worship, open my heart to the prayers and persuasion of others, and continue the habits of Bible reading and Christian living instilled in me during my childhood now that I am an adult? While I have never belonged to a perfect congregation, I have enjoyed the privilege of belonging

to some remarkable communities of faith. Half have been large and half modest in size. All have been led by thoughtful pastors and wise lay leaders, whom I perceived to be people of durable faith and joy. In most, the music and liturgical style have matched my own preferences, but I do not think this kind

I have been carried by the prayers and generosity of others at several critical times in my life.

of Christian witness depends primarily on aesthetic sensibilities.

Maybe it is best to say that some of what draws me into being the kind of Christian I am is a mystery even to me.

I began by saying that I have always believed that God matters. If God matters, then some of God's ways are likely not to be my ways at all. I believe that God has the means to reach out to me through the strange and surprising—as well as the familiar and the common—when it comes to an actual community of faith.

I try to listen carefully to those who tell me why they have stopped attending church or why they seek a kind of churchless Christianity. I understand much of those critiques—weariness with stale language, disappointment with the lack of vibrant preaching, the church's disengagement from the issues of the day, or simply a longing for a community of people of one's own generation. All

those are reasonable.

Rarely do I hear people lament the lack of transcendence or sacramental mystery as their reason for being loosely connected to a congregation. I wonder if we have come to assume that holiness is no longer a part of churchly life.

It happens that I am a Christian who is a Lutheran. While I could articulate how a Lutheran identity has shaped my experience as a Christian, I suspect that this part of my story is shared by Christians of every sort—and not only in the United States.

If there's any motivation to add to the ones I have named, it is this: I have been profoundly moved by the Christians I have come to know from other countries and cultures. Whether we share a spoken language or not, we have been able to pray and worship, study and feast together within the embrace of a common faith in Jesus Christ. This communion is a joy I wish for everyone I know. That's the kind of Christian I am. 🌿

Patricia Lull serves as dean of students at Luther Seminary. She is a member of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minn., where she volunteers as an affiliated pastor. Her nieces and nephews live in California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. She can be reached at plull@luthersem.edu. She invites you to respond to her article—to tell her why you live out your Christian faith in the way that you do.

SESSION 9

Esther: Reversal of Fortune

by Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel



BIBLE STUDY

Theme Verse

The Great Reversal (Esther 9:1b)

“The very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the reverse happened, and the Jews got their enemies in their power.” (authors’ translation)

Opening

Hymn “Oh, Praise the Gracious Power” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 651 or *With One Voice* 750)

Prayer

O Prince of Peace,
we give you thanks and praise
that on the cross you conquered sin, death, and evil.
We lift up before you all victims of violence and abuse
and pray that through your Holy Spirit
they may experience your peace
which passes all understanding.
Strengthen all who work to bring your justice
and peace to this world.
We thank you for all the saints
who have heroically shown *hesed*
to your people and creation.
In your name we pray.
Amen.

Overview

In the conclusion of the book of Esther, Esther’s *hesed* toward and identification with the Jews in Persia saves them from their enemies. The vulnerable community defends themselves and kills more than 75,000 of their enemies. This violence is a reason that both Christians and Jews had difficulty in accepting the book of Esther as Scripture. The focus is not on the violence, however, but on the miraculous deliverance from certain death. Is this God’s hidden hand at work?

Another Feast!

READ ESTHER 6:14–7:6. Eunuchs rush Haman off to Esther’s second feast, where once again there seems to be plenty of wine (7:2). During this feast, Esther asserts both her Persian and her Jewish identity. She asserts her Persian identity as queen by reminding the king of their relationship. “If I have won your favor,” and “if it pleases you, O King,” are phrases that Esther has used in 5:4 and 5:8 to remind the king that he both chose her to be queen and promised to grant her petition.

Esther also asserts her identity with her Jewish people, which surprises the king and Haman.

1. List the words and phrases in Esther 7:1–6 that demonstrate Esther’s identification with her people.

Up to this point, neither Haman nor the king has been aware that Esther is Jewish. But now Esther chooses to act on her *hesed* to her people. Is she also acting on

essed to God? Since she never mentions God, we can only guess.

The queen presents her petition in terms that suggest that she is helpless. Her suggestion that her people might have been sold as slaves is both an ironic allusion to the king accepting Haman's bribe (3:9), and a hint that she has the king's best interests at heart. If the king had sold the Jews as slaves, it would have provided him a better profit than destroying them would.

As mentioned in the last session, Esther reworks Mordecai's plan, just as Ruth reworked Naomi's plan. Esther appeals to the king's self-interest and concern for his honor, rather than to his compassion, of which no evidence has been given. The king's concern for his honor was demonstrated in chapter 1. He had deposed Queen Vashti rather than be known as a king who could not command his queen. Now, if Esther were to be killed along with the rest of her people, he would be known as the king who could not protect his queen. He would lose all respect. Stung, he asks who has shamed him. Esther makes it clear: "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman" (7:6a).

2. How does Esther demonstrate wisdom and power in reworking Mordecai's plan?

How Esther waits. Has she judged the king correctly?

Haman's Fall

READ ESTHER 7:7-10. The king's wrath (the same as we saw in chapter 1) sends him out into the garden. The king faces a dilemma. He has always depended upon others to tell him what to do. Yet now his vizier and his queen are enemies, challenging each other. Which one is right? Should he get rid of his queen? He has done that before. Yet Esther had first made her request in front of the entire court, and he has promised three times to grant her request. Haman has shamed him by revealing his laziness and lack of concern for events in

his empire. Yet how can he punish Haman for moving forward with an edict to which the king had agreed?

Haman falls before the queen to beg for his life, the beginning of his falling before the Jewish people (recall our exercise at the end of Session 8). In an ironic reversal, where Mordecai would not bow down (or fall) before Haman, now Haman falls before Mordecai's cousin, the queen.

In another irony, the king, seeing Haman on Esther's couch, accuses Haman of assaulting his queen. This false accusation allows the king to hang Haman for a different reason than the edict against the Jews. Haman, whose false accusations would lead the Jews to their death, faces a false accusation that will lead to his own death.

Esther's wisdom in winning the favor of her maids and eunuchs is seen once again when the eunuch Harbona points out to the king the gallows upon which Haman was going to hang Mordecai, who had saved the king. Haman was going to destroy a valuable member of the king's court, who just yesterday was paraded through town with royal honors. This gives the king another reason to hang Haman. In another ironic reversal, Haman dies on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

Haman's concern for his own honor and reputation leads to his downfall and death. Mordecai's and Esther's *hesed* to their people is rewarded both personally and with the salvation of the Jews. This ironic reversal suggests that "what goes around, comes around." This theme of fitting punishments and rewards, of getting what one deserves, is a common one in the Bible and still in our culture today.

3. Can you think of times when this theme of getting what one deserves has happened in your life? Does life always work out this way?

Not the End of the Story

READ ESTHER 8:1–8. The king's actions suggest that he feels that with Haman's death and Mordecai's promotion he has addressed Esther's concerns and protected his queen. His honor is satisfied. He is thinking in the short term, but Esther has a longer view. The edict calling for the death of the Jews remains in force.

Esther moves beyond an appeal to the king's honor to an emotional appeal to his love. This is necessary because she is asking the king to find a way around an edict he has already permitted. He will look foolish, changing his mind and sending out another edict. She is wisely using all her gifts in an act of *hesed* for her people.

Her fourfold plea in 8:5 is a masterful emotional appeal. There is an appeal to their relationship and an appeal to the pleasure and wisdom of the king. She shows that she understands the king, for he yields once again, letting Esther do as she will. The king has not changed. He still uses power without wisdom.

Balanced with this appeal to the king's emotions is Esther's complete identification with her people, her kindred. The Hebrew word translated as *people* is the same that Ruth speaks to Naomi when she says, "your people shall be my people" (Ruth 1:16). This word includes a sense of fellow citizens of a community or country. The word translated *kindred* is more intimate, suggesting children or siblings, those who share a mother. She is closely identifying with her people.

4. How is Esther balancing her *hesed* or faithfulness to the Jews with her *hesed* toward her husband, the king?

Another Edict! A Summary

Mordecai's edict goes out to the same people and with the same language as Haman's earlier edict, except that it prominently mentions the Jews. This edict allows the Jews to defend themselves and to take revenge and kill, destroy, and annihilate any armed force (along with

women and children) that attacks them on the date named in the earlier edict. There is some humor here suggesting that the Jews will not act in self-defense unless they have the king's permission.

Conversions?

READ ESTHER 8:15–17. The new edict allowing the Jews self-defense and Mordecai's royal honors clearly show that the king now favors the Jews. The Jewish people receive Mordecai's edict with great joy. Others see this shift in the royal favor and profess to be Jews. There is a certain irony here. Earlier, the Jews were helpless and vulnerable. Now they are so popular that many want to join.

The word translated as *profess to be Jews* is simply the verb form of the word *Jew*. Interpreters have disagreed on what precisely this means. Some see it as the Persians merely identifying with the Jewish cause, others as their pretending to be Jews, and others as real conversion. One reason for this confusion is that it is not clear in the book of Esther what it means to be a Jew.

In the book of Esther, being a Jew is not about religious practices, such as keeping the biblical laws or observing the Sabbath. Esther clearly does not observe these distinctive practices, since she is able to conceal her Jewish identity. In the book of Esther, being a Jew at first seems to be more of an ethnic than a religious distinction (note the description of Mordecai's lineage in 2:5–6), but as we see now, with Persians professing to be Jews, even that is in question.

The question about who is a Jew and what precisely that entails was important after the Babylonian Exile. The book of Ruth challenged the ethnic definition by arguing that anyone who practiced *hesed* could be a member of the community. This claim is in conversation with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which argue that one must have the proper ethnic lineage and strictly obey the biblical laws. The book of Esther presents a third option. *Anyone* can be a member of the

community, without any mention of the law, lineage, or *seed*. This conversation about who is a member of the community continues to be important today.

A similar conversation sometimes occurs among Christians. Who is a “real” Christian? For some, that means having the correct beliefs about Jesus; for others, it has to do with attending worship regularly or leading a moral and upright life. People who are thought to be a Christian in name only are called *nominal* Christians. Is someone who was baptized, confirmed, and married in the church but does not come to worship a Christian? What about people who bring their children to be baptized but then never bring them to Sunday school or to attend worship? Are they Christian? Why or why not? (See “What Kind of Christian,” p. 22.)

5. *What makes one a “real” Christian? Explain. Are there certain biblical passages that help you think about this question? Is it up to us to judge?*

God often works in mysterious, hidden, and surprising ways. Esther and Mordecai appear to be “nominal” Jews. They don’t practice any Jewish rituals or keep the God laws. Yet, God uses these two to save God’s people. Some of Jesus’ disciples and many of his acquaintances were most likely “nominal” Jews as well. Certainly tax collectors, such as Matthew (or Levi) and Zacchaeus, prostitutes, and sinners would have been considered the best nominal Jews by the religious Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. Yet, these are the ones Jesus called and gathered to himself.

Jesus empowered many of these people to carry the good news of God’s salvation to the world. We may be surprised by how God is working through people we might consider nominal Christians.

6. *Have you had your faith deepened or experienced God working through a “nominal” Christian? Share your answer with the person on your right.*

God’s salvation comes to us through the cross, not military victory. God may speak and work in this world through surprising people. God saved God’s people during the time of King Ahasuerus through two totally assimilated Jews, Esther and Mordecai.

At Great Cost

READ ESTHER 9:15–17. Esther 9:1–10 describes a great reversal. Instead of being destroyed, the Jews are saved. But their deliverance comes at the cost of 75,000 lives in the provinces and 800 in Susa. This violence has made both Jews and Christians uncomfortable over the centuries. We can think about this violence in several ways.

- As mentioned in session 7, the book of Esther is not a historical document, but an inspired tale set in a historical period to discuss certain issues. There is no historic record of Jews killing 75,000 people in the Persian Empire.
- This is another example of exaggeration in the book of Esther. The numbers suggest that the Jews faced *many* enemies, even in the citadel itself.
- We often find this type of image among the powerless and vulnerable. It encourages them to see themselves as powerful and active, not as helpless objects of other people’s power. It is more imagination than an accurate reflection of reality.

7. *Christians often have problems with violence in the Bible because of several of Jesus’ sayings. Fill out the chart on page 30 to compare some of these sayings.*

How do we understand the tension between the violence found in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus’ sayings? How do we listen to the conflicting voices in the Bible? What guides can help us as we enter this living conversation to discern God’s word for us today?

It is not enough to say that the God of the Hebrew

Verse	What Jesus says about violence and enemies
Matthew 5:38–39	
Luke 6:35–36	
Matthew 26:52	
Matthew 5:21–22	

Bible is a God of anger and the God of the New Testament is a God of love. That would suggest that there are two different Gods in our Bible. From the earliest times, Christians have confessed that the God of the Hebrew Bible *is* the God of the New Testament; the God who creates us is also the God who redeems us. Such statements also ignore the many examples of grace and love in the Hebrew Bible and examples of judgment and wrath in the New Testament.

While we might be uncomfortable with the violence in this text, Christians also need to admit that we have often failed to live up to the peaceful words of Jesus. Christians have historically engaged in violence against Jews, and Lutherans must take a special responsibility for the Holocaust. In 1543 Martin Luther wrote that Jews were conceited, blasphemous children of the devil who should have their synagogues and schools burned down, their houses destroyed, and be ejected from the country. “At least, they should lose all their money and be forced to work in the fields for Christians.”

This thinking provided an intellectual basis for discrimination against the Jews and eventually to the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s. Over the centuries, people have echoed Haman’s and Luther’s anti-Jewish attitudes to ghettoize, persecute, and kill Jews.

In 1994, the Church Council of the ELCA adopted a declaration to the Jewish people, rejecting Luther’s language and thought. This declaration also rejected all forms of anti-Semitism as “a contradiction and an affront

to the Gospel.” (See the ELCA Web site for the entire document, www.elca.org/ecumenical/interreligious.)

The Rest of the Story

The story of Esther ends with the institution of the festival of Purim, named after the lot cast for a fortuitous day for the slaughter of the Jews. Mordecai calls upon all Jews from this time forward to celebrate the day with feasting, gift giving, and presents to the poor. Esther writes a letter commending the celebration.

Chapter 10 tells of Mordecai rising to royal importance. As vizier, he seeks the welfare of the Jews. Esther is absent from this last chapter, just as Ruth gave way to Naomi at the end of the book of Ruth.

Many Jews today remember Esther as a heroic wise woman who used her beauty and intelligence to save her people. It is an orphaned young woman, rather than a prophet, priest, or warrior king like David, who delivers her people.

Esther is also an example of *hesed* toward the community even at great personal risk. Both Jews and Christians continue to ponder the events of the book of Esther, seeking to discern God’s hidden hand. (See “Showing the Love of Christ,” p.6, to see other examples of *hesed* toward a certain community.)

Series Conclusion

This year we have looked at three wisdom books using three H concepts—*hesed*, heroic actions, and the hidden

and of God. *Hesed* is loving loyalty and faithfulness, the unanticipated depths one will go to meet the essential needs of others. Heroic actions are actions for the sake of others that involve risk to oneself. Sometimes these actions are bold acts that challenge the status quo, and sometimes they are merely the routine actions of daily life. The hidden hand of God asks us to see God work in the world through human actions and not just in the miraculous.

These three lenses and books have encouraged us to ask several questions. These include: How and to whom do we express *hesed* today? What risks and heroic actions is God calling us to? How do we live in those times when God is hidden? These stories also ask us to consider who is welcome in the community and why. In other words, how do we live out and practice our discipleship in this very complex world?

We hope that these studies have encouraged us

to think of the Bible as a living conversation between God, God's people, and our complex world.

Closing

Participants were invited at the end of the last session to reflect upon a person who best embodies the three major themes of our study, *hesed* or loving kindness, heroic actions and who have been part of God's hidden hand in their lives. They may have brought art or craft work, a poem, or a story. Encourage all participants to share their thoughts or object. After each participant speaks, have the group respond with "O God, we give you thanks and praise for the life and wisdom of all your saints."

Close this time with the Lord's Prayer. 🌿

The Rev. Gwen Saylor is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. **The Rev. Ann Fritschel** is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary.

	<i>Hesed</i> – faithfulness, loving loyalty	Heroic Action	Hidden Hand
Ruth	Ruth follows Naomi, choosing Boaz. <i>Hesed</i> as criterion for who is welcome in the community.	Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz. Boaz acts against the laws against the Moabites.	Through Ruth's heroic action, the family lineage is preserved and the family's security assured.
Daniel 1–6	Ultimate <i>hesed</i> belongs to God, not human government. Life in <i>hesed</i> , will thrive and survive.	Maintaining the ordinary daily routines of obeying God's law leads to persecution. Sign of being a part of the community.	God sends angels to accompany the faithful in the fiery furnace and lions' den.
Esther	Displays wisdom in winning <i>hesed</i> of court officials, identifies with Jews, acts with <i>hesed</i> to save her people.	Using gifts to win favor in the harem, risks life in seeking the king, challenges Haman in his presence.	Are coincidence, reversal, and irony the hidden hand of God? Without human actions God's actions will not be carried out.



One day retreat

Many Bible study groups love to gather monthly with *Lutheran Woman Today's* three-session summer Bible study, but for others, vacations and travel plans make it hard to get together. What to do?

Gather for a one-day retreat with the *LWT* summer Bible study, "Mary: A Woman for All Seasons."

WHO: Invite the women in your congregation and other congregations, especially college-aged women and high-school girls. This study considers Mary at different ages—wouldn't it be wonderful to look at how her example sheds light on our own spiritual lives in the company of women of different ages?

WHERE: Choose a scenic spot—perhaps the back yard of a first-class gardener. Or maybe someone's condo has a nice clubhouse with a patio. Think of a place that'll let you all enjoy not only the riches of Scripture but also the beauty of summer.

WHEN: Any time after the July/August issue arrives in about the middle of June. Remind everyone to bring their copies of both the June and July/August issues to the retreat, or you can download all three sessions for free from the *LWT* Web site (www.lutheranwoman.today.org) and make copies for everyone—plus a few extras. The leader guide is included, so people don't need to bring anything else but their Bibles.

HOW: Share the work! Ask someone different to lead each of the three sessions (it's easy; the leader guide appears in the magazine with each session). Ask someone else to lead the hymns and ask some others to

lead the opening and closing prayers. Ask a few other people to arrange healthful refreshments, and ask some others to decorate the area with fresh summer greenery and flowers.

DIRECTIONS: Start the morning with a light breakfast of coffee, bagels or croissants, and fresh fruit. About 9:30 gather the group for the first session, "The Annunciation," in the June issue. That'll take about an hour.

Stretch your legs, go look at the garden, stroll around the patio, have another strawberry or two. Then call the group back together for the second session, "Kinships, Friendships, and Holy Encounters," in the July/August issue. Then it's time for lunch.

After lunch, call the group back together to enjoy the third session, "Mary Among the Disciples." When the group has completed that, it's time for a closing devotion of your choosing.

Welcome people to linger for a little more conversation before picking up and heading for home.

Be sure to tell the group about the *LWT* Bible study that starts in the September issue—"To God Beloved: Paul's Letter to the Romans." Author Sarah Henrich shows us what it is about this letter that made Martin Luther call it the most important piece in the New Testament. He even said it would be worth memorizing!

And as you wave goodbye until the next time, bask in the joy of sharing friendship, hospitality, and God's word together in the beauty of a summer day.

MARY: A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

Ecclesiastes 3:1

How do you picture Mary, the mother of Jesus?

As a teenager, startled at an angel's sudden intrusion?

As a new mother, cuddling her son?

As the mother of a pre-teen, shocked at her child's emerging independence?

As a loyal and lively friend, the kind who today would drive across the country to be with her older cousin, Elizabeth, who was facing a high-risk pregnancy; the kind of woman who today would text-message her son's friend John?

As a woman bereft, the Pietá?

As an older woman with graying hair, a mature leader in her local congregation?

Would you be surprised to learn that all of these images of Mary have roots in Scripture?

Mary for Lutherans

Maybe some of us are a little wary of a Bible study about Mary because we associate her with such non-biblical practices as praying *to* Mary. You might be interested to know that Martin Luther calls Mary “the highest woman and the noblest gem of Christianity after Christ” (Christus sermon, 1531), and that in the

Apology of the Augsburg Confession (one of the foundational documents of the Lutheran Church) we read that “blessed Mary prays for the church,” that she is “worthy of the highest honors” (*Book of Concord*; Tappert p. 232).

Mary for All Seasons

Mary is one of the few female characters of the Bible whom we see not just once or twice, but over decades. Whether you plan to do this summer Bible study as a personal devotion, as a one-day retreat, or with a circle of other women during the summer, we hope you will find Mary to be a friend to cherish, a spiritual guide who points you forward to a fuller life in Christ as you experience your own seasons as a woman of faith.

In this summer Bible study we will take a closer look at these three seasons in the life of Mary:

Session 1: The Annunciation

What is it like to be on the brink of womanhood and visited by a messenger of God Almighty? We will reflect on youthful spirituality—that season of surprises, hopefulness,

and perhaps naïve courage to take on great big God-sized projects.

Session 2: Kinships, Friendships, and Holy Encounters

We will look at two instances of intergenerational friendships and blessings: when the teen-aged Mary goes to visit her middle-aged cousin Elizabeth, and later when Mary and her family are blessed by elders in the temple after the birth of Jesus.

Session 3: Mary Among the Disciples

Mary may well have been a widow when she was called to a new role as a mature leader in the early church. We will consider the poignant moment when Jesus entrusts his beloved disciple into Mary's care and a final glimpse of Mary joining the disciples in prayer. 🌸

The Rev. Christa von Zychlin just celebrated her half-century birthday by running a marathon, and then moving to Asia with her husband and youngest son, serving with ELCA Global Mission in Hong Kong, China. Now serving the church on a fourth continent (having previously served in Ohio, Africa, Iowa, Germany, France, and Wisconsin), Pastor Christa invites you to share in her current adventures at <http://marathonangel.blogspot.com>.



WELCOMING PASTOR ALISON

by Jennifer Pencek

The Rev. Alison Schmidt Bowlan, age 26, from Jacksonville, Florida, is known for her shoes. Green ones, sparkly ones, and even some with red rhinestones.

She also holds the distinction of being the first female pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in State College, Pennsylvania.

She did wear black shoes the first couple of weeks. "I had to let people get used to a woman pastor being here," she says. But she soon put her sparkly shoes back on and hasn't looked back. She says, at Grace, she hasn't had to change anything about herself in order to belong.

The young Pastor Alison works with veterans—Senior Pastor P. Stephens Lynn and Pastor Larry H. Louder, ordained 26 years ago and 15 years ago, respectively.

All three pastors say that the congregation is better off for their personality and age differences. People might relate to one pastor more than another, and pastors and parishioners can be themselves.

EARNING TO ACCEPT CHANGE

In 2004, Pastor Alison, as she is known around the church, graduated from Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina, with a bachelor of arts degree in youth and family ministry, followed four years later with her master of divinity degree from Gettysburg Seminary.

While interning at a congregation in Birmingham, Alabama, she had her first taste of being treated differently because of her gender. She says that while the congregation accepted her, the rest of the community wasn't so welcoming.

"I knew a pastor who refused to shake my hand because I'm a woman," she says. "It made me feel like a stronger person. I truly believe God can call people of all ages and both genders to serve. My goal is to help others."

Part of helping others includes implementing change. Not long

after coming to Grace, Pastor Alison changed the confirmation program from a two-year process to three years. The rest of the pastoral staff supported the change, but not all parents were happy about it. "It was met with some resistance, but I said, 'These are the reasons for it,'" she says. "After a year or so, people will be used to me and it won't be an issue."

Change accompanied by explanation tends to go over well, says Senior Pastor Lynn. "As long as change is done with care, this congregation is fine with it," he says, adding that Pastor Alison is "fairly secure in herself, and that helps. It helps get people closer to her sooner rather than later."

In other congregations, change can be met with stiff resistance. Pastor Louder says he'd use any other word than the word *change*—enrich, develop, or something else. But in a community like State College, with its proximity to Penn State University, there's almost an expectation of change, he says. "Still, there needs to be the preparation of change and explanation of change, but acceptance of it is easier here than other places," he says.

Pastor Lynn and Pastor Louder have yet to hear negative comments about Pastor Alison. Part of that is from the process that brought Pastor Alison to the congregation. Her

position was created by combining two former positions. Lynn and Louder carried out the duties of the new position as the young candidate was interviewed by the call committee and council, who unanimously approved her, and then approved by the congregation, whose vote was 98 percent in favor.

"They were ready for this," Lynn says of the congregation. "They wanted us to call someone. I said early on that because we have two older guys, we were hoping the bishop in the church could give us a female candidate."

THE POWER OF TIME

Being a part of the Allegheny Synod puts Pastor Alison in the company of other female pastors. Pastor Lynn says the synod has the largest proportion of female pastors in the ELCA, at 40 percent. Pastor Alison also has a synod-appointed mentor, Pastor Louder.

While others might feel trepidation at entering a new position in an unfamiliar area, Pastor Alison followed her faith—and her gut. "If I hadn't felt comfortable, I wouldn't have come here," she says. "You have to trust the process and trust the Lord is at work."

Trusting time may also ease any misgivings. Pat Ishler, a lifelong member of Grace, is a firm believer in the healing powers of time. "I

think for some of the older members, change is hard to accept," she says. "As far as myself, time takes care of a lot of things."

Ishler, who has been involved with the church in various capacities over the years, says Pastor Alison's uniqueness is just what her position and the congregation needed. "Maybe she'd be a little out there to some of the other members, but she doesn't bother me," she says with a laugh. "I think it's good to have a woman. She's come to Esther Circle, and that's good to keep her in touch with the women's organization."

For parishioner Lois Voigt, the young pastor's presence is a good opportunity for both the congregation and Pastor Alison herself. "Especially with people who are getting older, we need to listen to the younger generation very seriously and not just do things the way they've always been done," she says. "We have to change with the times, but we also have to listen to

the older generations with a great deal of respect."

Pastor Alison understands issues from both sides, is open-minded, and is not judgmental, Voigt says. "Just the spirit in her supersedes age," she says. "She doesn't have the life experience, but she has that spiritual guidance and training. She's able to cross the aisle between young and old, conservative and liberal."

When Voigt looks at Pastor Alison, she sees a dream fulfilled. As a girl, Voigt wanted to be a pastor herself. However, her synod didn't ordain women. "I was resentful of my gender because I couldn't be a pastor," she says. "I was so happy for Pastor Alison, because she could follow her dream."

But there is still unfinished business in Pastor Alison's mind, including creating a support network outside of church. While she has her husband, Matt, to turn to, she's still learning how to form friendships with people outside the congregation.

"That's one thing they don't teach you in seminary—how to form friendships outside of church," she says. "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have Matt. This process is a very emotional process, and it's a very draining process. It's important that people give new pastors a chance."

Pastor Alison also is working on relating to older parishioners in a way that doesn't remind them of their sweet younger relatives. "People see me as a kid," she says. "I'm always referred to as someone's granddaughter. That's been my biggest challenge, how to relate to people my parents' age. I'm still working on it."

But in the meantime, she just wants a chance, the same chance she'd hope people would give to anyone new. "Give them a chance to show you what God has done in their lives," she says. 🌸

Jennifer Pencek lives in State College, Pennsylvania, and is a member of Grace Lutheran Church.



"We have to change with the times, but we also have to listen to the older generations with a great deal of respect."

Lois Voigt, parishioner

The women of the church hosted a bridal shower for Pastor Alison in December 2008. Here Pastor Alison chats with Winabelle Deppen.



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for
action, advocacy,
programs, or
further study



Celebrate World Fair Trade Day

Celebrate World Fair Trade Day with Lutheran World Relief and thousands of people around the world on May 9.

LWR and its Fair Trade allies offer resources to help churches and community groups plan and celebrate World Fair Trade Day. Every year, conscientious consumers celebrate the effort to create a global economy based on justice, dignity, and sustainability. This year the emphasis is on Fair Trade's positive impact on the environment.

For more information and free resources for planning your World Fair Trade Day event, visit www.lwr.org/fairtrade or e-mail fairtrade@lwr.org.

Eat well and feed the hungry

Rachel Circle, one of four Women of the ELCA groups at Swedesburg Evangelical Lutheran Church, Swedesburg, Iowa, published a cookbook that benefits the hungry locally, regionally, and worldwide. Some of the proceeds from sales go to ELCA World Hunger.

Come to the Table has 228 pages of favorite recipes from 155 church members and friends. It's available from the church for \$15. Recipes from a 70-year-old annual Women of the ELCA Smörgåsbord fundraiser are also included. (The most recent Smörgåsbord raised \$5,800 that was distributed among 20 ministries and charities.)

"There are a lot of good, tried and true recipes in church cookbooks, everybody knows that," said Lisa Olson, a Rachel Circle participant and co-chair

of the cookbook project. Now in its fifth edition, *Come to the Table* was first published by the church in 1927. Other editions were published in 1941, for the church's centennial in 1966, and in 1982. The 2008 edition includes new recipes and some of the old favorites people are always asking for, Olson said.

To order the cookbook or find out how to publish your own, call 319-254-2216 or e-mail slc@farmtel.net.

Mobilize women: Assemble flood buckets

Help those affected by floods, tropical storms, and hurricanes get the supplies they need to start cleaning up their homes. A flood bucket is a collection of cleaning supplies and safety equipment, all packed into a 5-gallon plastic bucket.

To download a two-page flyer that lists flood bucket contents and describes how to assemble them and where to ship them, visit www.womenoftheelca.org and click on "Engage in Action" then "Assemble Flood Buckets" on the left side of your screen.

Disaster knows no season. Encourage the women in your unit to make a gift to ELCA Disaster Response through Women of the ELCA. Make your check payable to Women of the ELCA and write "Flooding-U.S." on the check memo line.

Mail the check to: Women of the ELCA Designated Gifts, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694-1256. One hundred percent of the funds will be given to ELCA Disaster Response.



BLESSED TO belong

by Mary La Plante

This profile of a woman of faith is the first in a series of articles focusing on women who help grow and sustain Women of the ELCA. Watch for future articles in Women of the ELCA's Interchange newsletter and on our Web site, www.womenoftheelca.org.

Women of the ELCA is blessed to count many bold women of faith among its participants, including Marian Chase, president of her congregational unit at United in Christ Lutheran Church in Eveleth, Minnesota. Whether leading a *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study in her congregation, organizing a

screening of the organization's new DVD, coordinating a blood drive, or giving the gift of Individual Partnerships to new members of her congregation (18 at this writing!), Marian takes seriously her involvement with Women of the ELCA. She also believes that by living out of the three main mission areas

of the Purpose Statement—growth, community, and action—Women of the ELCA can serve as a source of hope and inspiration for current and future generations of women.

And just exactly how do these three aspects of our Purpose Statement help create a community of faith that sustains and nurtures

current and future Women of the ELCA participants? Growth, Marian believes, is lived out through Bible study—and in particular, the *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study. She says, “While one can grow as an individual by studying alone, the experience is much richer by sharing and learning as a group.”

Speaking of community, Marian mentions a Women of the ELCA survey that cites the friendship and support of women in their congregational unit as being “the best part of participating in Women of the ELCA.” Marian has experienced that support first-hand: “I feel blessed to belong to this community. These women are more than sisters—they hold me up and support me. We sisters in Christ are there for each other, sharing joys as well as sorrows.”

Marian and the other women in the circles at United in Christ Lutheran Church believe it is equally important to open up circles to new members of their congregation. By providing scholarships to younger church members to attend synodical women’s organization conventions, inviting them to their own circles, and introducing them to Women of the ELCA through

Individual Partnerships, they are helping introduce Women of the ELCA to future generations. “Individual Partnerships are the entry point for getting new members of your congregation involved; we give them to all new members of our congregation. And I also strongly encourage all who are not involved in a circle to join a circle or establish a new one. If none of the existing meetings fit your schedule, pick a day and time to establish a circle. A mentor can work with you to guide you in the process.”

And as for action, Marian looks to the prophet Isaiah, who exhorts us to share our food with the hungry, help the poor, and serve victims of injustice and oppression. The circles in Marian’s congregation live this out by providing food baskets to those living in transitional housing; assisting Lutheran Social Service homeless youth programs; providing quilts, school kits, and soap to Lutheran World Relief; organizing blood drives; and supporting the Salvation Army and Eveleth Health Services Park. The women were also instrumental in building and furnishing a new church kitchen.

Marian Chase and the women at United in Christ Lutheran Church have worked hard to create a faith community that nourishes

and sustains themselves, their congregation, and the community in which they live. They take seriously the Women of the ELCA Purpose Statement, which calls them “to discipleship in Jesus Christ,” and they live that out by participating in Bible study, forming a close faith community, and engaging in action to help the poor, hungry, and disenfranchised. Says Marian: “I receive love and support and community from my circle—this community of women who love and support each other and hold each other up. We are all so close. We celebrate when we have something to celebrate, and we also hold each other through sorrow. With God’s help and guidance and the help of our family here at United in Christ, we have accomplished much more than we ever could have imagined.” 🌸

Mary La Plante is director for marketing, Women of the ELCA.

To order the new free Women of the ELCA DVD, “Created in the Image of God: A Community of Women,” or learn more about making someone an individual partner in Women of the ELCA, call 800-638-3522. The video can be viewed on our Web site, www.womenoftheelca.org.



MOM

gave you life.
This Mother's Day,
give her something
to enrich hers.

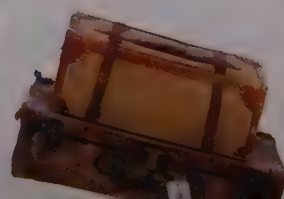
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RACE NOTES

The Seasons of Our Lives

by Beth Wrenn



Last July, at the Seventh

Triennial Convention in Salt Lake City, we began a new triennium. Each triennium is a new season in the life of our organization but little did I know that it would be the beginning of several new seasons in my life.

Last October, as I prepared for our first meeting of the newly elected executive board, I found myself reflecting on everything that had occurred since my election as president in July.

As I considered these life stages, I turned to a wonderful Women of the ELCA resource, *Living from the Heart of God: A Journal for Life's Stages*. This book has been very helpful to me during the past months—the quotations in this column are taken from it (you can order *Living from the Heart of God* by calling 800-328-4648, item #978-6-0002-1959-8; price \$10.99).

As I read the meditation entitled “Exploring what God is calling you to do,” I found strength in realizing that when God calls us to a new challenge, we must rely on the promise that is found in Scripture. As I read from Isaiah 43:1, “I have called you by name, you are mine,” I was encouraged to “feel secure in God’s call because God loves each of us and knows us intimately.” This is such a comfort to me as I begin this exciting journey with the Women of the ELCA.

In August, my parents decided to move from their home of nearly 40 years to a retirement community. I am so proud of them for making such a life-changing

decision. However, that decision came with anxiety and uncertainty. When moving day arrived, we were exhausted, excited, and apprehensive. Because of their age and health concerns, I am confident they made the right decision. I’m filled with the certainty that God is with them—and me—as this new stage of our life unfolds.

In September, Ann, my dearest friend of more than 30 years, died after a long battle with lymphoma. Yet, “there is one thing that is certain in our grief: The Lord promises that there will be times of joy ahead of us no matter what sorrow we are currently experiencing.”

Finally in October, our daughter, Anna, was married. What a joyful celebration! “There’s an old Spanish saying, *recordar es vivir* (to remember is to live).” I will always remember Anna looking so beautiful on her wedding day, and the joy we felt. I will always remember my friend Ann, especially her great laugh and her wonderful way of telling stories. To remember is to live—I was ready to celebrate the life of my dear friend and the marriage of our daughter at the same time!

Through these past months, I came to know with a new clarity that God will sustain and hold us, especially during the most difficult times. What seasons of life have you experienced? How have they strengthened your faith? I encourage you to share the stories of your life seasons with others. 🌿

Beth Wrenn is churchwide president, Women of the ELCA.

In next month’s issue of *LWT*, we will begin the three-session summer Bible study, “Mary: A Woman for All Seasons” (see page 33 to learn more).



AMEN!

Better Way, Better World

by Catherine Malotky

Sometimes, God, I am overwhelmed by the violence I see all around me. The news is full of rape, murder, assault, abuse. War rages in far too many corners of your creation. Sometimes our violence is grotesque, atrocious, horrendous—think nuclear weaponry, mass rape, genocide.

Sometimes our violence is subtle yet devastating—think neglecting children because we do not have the time or resources to nourish them, whether they are our own or not. Think about drowning our water and choking our air with poisons that we say would cost too much to eliminate.

Think of too many video games, road rage, or careless littering. Think of our biases working their way into our lives, creating suspicions, enemies, ruined reputations, troubled congregations or families, addictions and dysfunctions. Oh, God. I could be crushed beneath the weight!

Yet it is May. Where I live, the earth is awakening from winter's stillness. We have honored Easter and been reminded that from every death you can and will bring new life. The remarkable resilience of your creation, both human and not, calls me to hope.

There are those who reject the biblical story for the violence in it, but I am, in some ways, consoled by it. We are not unusually bad, we 21st-century human beings. We read testimony of our propensity for violence all over our holy stories, and sometimes our forebears in faith attributed that violence to you, God.

My soul does not bear a wrathful God easily. I want you to spare me God, to create a safe space where no one abuses another, where life is whole and without pain.

This may be your vision and our hope, but it is not the truth of the life I live and see around me. God, is it then your will, as some have suggested? Is violence the only way to even the score? Did you then kill your son so that I might be free? Some have seen it this way.

I see Jesus, who, time and again, turned the other cheek, not without dignity, but from a different point of view than needing to keep score. Might it be that you, Creator of the Universe, invite us to a place where keeping score is not a feature of the game? Might this be your greatest gift to us, and the one most difficult for us to grasp?

It is May. The earth renews itself and the wonder of your imagination plays out before us. A seed dies and a plant grows. It is a fresh start, and you did not ask the seed whether it deserved to germinate. You made it that way.

And so you have made us. The violence I see is not all there is. Turn us away from scorekeeping to see the wonder that surrounds us. Give us courage to give witness to your earnest call to try again, your steadfast presence, and your hope. Open us to a better world and a better way. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



Andrea Niehaus, Marjorie Nicholas, Shirley Rill, Peggy Castina, and Sherrie Hobe (left to right) stand in front of a stack of 213 quilts sent to Lutheran World Relief last year.

WHOLE CHURCH KNOTTED TOGETHER

Quilters at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Alliance, Ohio, involved the whole congregation in their goal to send 200 quilts to Lutheran World Relief last year. Quite a challenge, considering the core group includes about five or six women!

After the quilt edges are stitched and bound, the group puts untied quilts on tables outside the sanctuary and in the fellowship hall and asks members of the congregation to say a prayer while tying the knots.

—Submitted by Shirley Rill

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